

As a parent of 3 Division I athletes, I feel obligated to weigh in on the question of whether varsity athletes are employees of the university they represent. They are.

This letter will seem wordy. However, I feel some stories are worth telling so you get a snapshot of some of the experiences out there. I apologize in advance for the long length.

Two of my three kids played for coaches who routinely broke NCAA rules regarding the number of hours an athlete is expected to "work" per week. And, seniors signing the timesheets as some sort of "check" is a joke. You might think "work" only pertains to workouts, team practices, etc. Not so. Players are also expected to attend donor dinners and visit hospitals as well as perform other community service activities the coach deems necessary (and mandatory). Another work-related requirement (depending on your coach's style) may involve stopping in their office as much as possible so that you give the appearance of trying to forge a personal relationship with them while at the same time dishing personal information about your teammates.

Northwestern's former quarterback is absolutely right in saying that, although schools pay for your education, athletes are, in most cases, unable to get the degree they really want due to the time and energy demands of their sport. Many degree programs, while attainable for most full time students, are completely out of reach when you're playing a varsity sport. Try going pre-med or getting an art degree where you have to put in mandatory studio hours that conflict with the sport's schedule. I saw many smart, hardworking kids forced to settle for degrees well beneath their intellect for lack of time.

In addition, I would add that the education money given my kids never covered all their living expenses. I could use many, many examples. Let me just mention a couple: One coach coerced all team members to stay on campus during the summer to work out and play every day. Players felt they had no choice but to comply. The coach never helped them find housing or got them any money to pay for housing/food. One summer, several kids were sleeping on the floor of an older teammate's apartment as they had nowhere else to go. I was sending

whatever money I could to cover living expenses. This school was close to 600 miles away from our home. Another coach actually withheld money from players designated for meals over Christmas break like it came from his personal checking account.

The same coach that was tightfisted with meal money refused to allow my kid to make up a lab (missed while out of town for an away game) because the class would coincide with the team's afternoon practice. That was freshman year. Imagine being a freshman trying to navigate that situation. The athletic director at that school was no better than the coach. So who is representing the interests of "student/athletes" there? Unions have a way of protecting members from all the aforementioned nonsense.

In many cases, athletes finish their fourth year of eligibility without having finished their degree program. At that point, the school may pay all or a portion of expenses for that year so an athlete can finish their degree. There is, however, no guarantee the school will cover that last year and if they do the athlete is required to put in a certain number of hours working in the athletic department in some capacity. That sounds to me like an employee/employer relationship. The same situation applies if an athlete suffers a career ending injury. The school continues to pay their expenses, but they must put in hours in the athletic department.

I believe this case is more than athletes lobbying for a share of the money universities make off them (as some contend). This is about kids having some sort of representation so that they have protections on their future health, protections against ridiculous coaches and a guarantee that their pursuit of a good education is honored. Only through the ability to collectively bargain for better working and living conditions are an underclass able to achieve those rights. Experience has shown us that the NCAA has many good rules in place. The enforcement of those rules is then left up to the schools.....or those brave enough to take on the role of whistle-blower. At our house, we always get a big kick out of those NCAA ads on TV about the athletes being students first. Yeah right. Our family knows better. But, wouldn't it be great if that were true? Maybe a union would see to that.